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COMPARING BUSINESS LAW IN ONLINE AND FACE TO FACE FORMATS: A DIFFERENCE IN STUDENT LEARNING PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper extends the body of research investigating potential differences in face to face and online delivery of a business law course. Using a unique survey, it investigates student perceptions of their learning and understanding of key course concepts, as well as student satisfaction with the course and course instruction. Further, the paper explores the specific characteristics of online versus face to face students that may impact their satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of post-secondary education are increasing their distance learning opportunities in response to societal demand for more convenient and flexible methods of college instruction, and as Falk and Blaylock (2010) suggest, making distance learning a “central focus”. Parker et al. (2011) report that 89% of four year public universities are offering online courses and that 50% of college presidents surveyed predict that by 2021 most undergraduates will take online courses. Pethokoukis (2002) reports that in the United States, online course enrollment is increasing by 33% per year. These opportunities can include hybrid courses, taught partially face to face and partially online, or courses taught fully online. As the addition of distance learning opportunities can be a budgetary concern for an institution, it is important to discover the best practices in creating online education that is as effective and satisfactory as the traditional face to face format (Bernard et al., 2004).

Throughout academic literature, two questions remain: (a) is it possible for fully online instruction to be as effective as traditional face to face instruction?; and (b) does fully online instruction satisfy student demands the same as face to face instruction? (Bernard et al., 2004). This paper addresses the fully online course, specifically of the business law discipline, which most business schools include in their required undergraduate curriculum to satisfy accreditation eligibility through the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB’s 2013 Business Standards). Although researchers have compared face to face and online sections of the same course in other business disciplines and in the humanities (Lyke and Frank, 2013; Driscoll et al., 2012; McFarland and Hamilton, 2005; Summers et al., 2005; Bernard et al., 2004; Finlay et al., 2004; and Rivera and Rice, 2002), there is little research on this comparison in business law (Shelley et al., 2007). Because introductory business law courses are distinctive in aspects such as students’ likely initial exposure to complex legal concepts, the subjective and interpretive nature of the discipline, and the less quantitative focus than several other business core curriculum

courses, it is important to examine the impact of course delivery model on both student learning and student satisfaction.

This paper contributes to the discussion of business law's use of online learning. We chose to investigate the business law discipline not only due to the lack of research comparing business law online and face to face courses, but because business law is materially different from other common core business courses, including accounting, finance, economics, and information systems. Where these common core courses are largely quantitative and objective, business law is a qualitative and subjective discipline. Business law is not often offered as a major in business schools so students may not give a core business law course the same focus and attention as one that was their business major of choice. Additionally, business law is in most instances the first time students have had legal studies, making the course more foreign than mathematically based courses such as the common core listed above. We investigate whether students taught using an identical course delivery plan by the same instructor, in online and face to face sections of an introductory business law course, perceive their learning and course satisfaction equally. We further explore specific student characteristics that may contribute to differences in satisfaction levels between the two delivery formats, such as student age, the number of hours that students work outside of school, and the number of credit hours in which students are enrolled.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Much research investigating the impact of online versus face to face course delivery exists. Two research streams within this literature are student learning and student satisfaction. Although prior research has suggested ways to eliminate differences in student learning and student satisfaction between the online and face to face delivery models, the results are inconsistent.

In the area of business school course delivery models, researchers have found conflicting results when comparing instructional delivery models. Wang and Newln (2000) find that business students in a face to face course environment outperform online business students on their final exams. Arbaugh and Duray (2001) find that online MBA students had higher learning than students in the face to face course. Using business students to analyze differences in course delivery method, several researchers do not find a difference in student learning (DiRienzo and Lilly, 2014; Ruth and Conners, 2012; and Vogt et al., 2005).

Student learning in online and face to face courses has been linked to the use of technology. Sun et al., (2012) find that the use of an electronic textbook encourages student engagement in the learning process, which may in turn impact student success. Cole et al., (2009) find that quick responses to email, introductory discussions of the students, and weekly video announcements can improve teaching effectiveness. To improve student success, Balkin et al. (2005) suggest that presentation slides and video lecture should be incorporated into the online course.

In the current study, electronic textbooks, email, introductory discussions of students, video announcements, slide presentations, and video lectures were utilized during the course instruction in both the face to face and online sections under comparison. Their inclusion could potentially improve the student's learning in either class format. Thus, the first research question investigates students' perceptions of their success in two of the course learning objectives.

RQ1a: Do students perceive their understanding of business law concepts differently in business law courses delivered online versus face to face?

RQ1b: Do students perceive their ability to think critically about the law differently in business law courses delivered online versus face to face?

Similar to the literature on student learning in online versus face to face courses, prior research varies on the impact that course delivery method has on student satisfaction. Russell (1999) does not find a difference in student satisfaction among students in online versus face to face courses. Johnson et al., (2000) and Shelly et al., (2008) find that face to face students are more satisfied with the course instructor than students taking the course online. Shelly et al., (2008) also find that course satisfaction varies significantly by gender, but not by age or nationality. Arbaugh and Duray (2002) find the opposite; students in online courses are more satisfied than students in face to face courses. Similarly, Finlay et al., (2009) find that students in online English composition courses are more satisfied than students in a face to face course setting. Further, several studies have shown that if the course experience is virtually the same between the two courses, differences in student satisfaction with a course can be overcome (Driscall et al., 2012; McFarland et al., 2005).

The courses used in this study were almost identical in course design and delivery. The only differences in the two course syllabi included minor assignment due dates and technology instructions in the online course syllabus. According to prior research, the similarity between the online and face to face class sections could lead to student satisfaction with the course by students in the differing delivery formats (Driscall et al., 2012; McFarland et al., 2005). The second research question investigates students' satisfaction with the course and the instructor and whether it is impacted by course delivery model.

RQ2a: Does student satisfaction with the course differ between course sections delivered online and course sections delivered face to face?

RQ2b: Does student satisfaction with the course instruction differ between course sections delivered online and course sections delivered face to face?

METHODOLOGY

One instructor taught both sections of the online format and the face to face format of the Legal Environment of Business during the same fifteen week semester, Spring 2013. One online section had 40 students and the other online section had 37 students. The face to face section had 86 students. The face to face section was taught during the daytime (11:00 am), while the online sections had no formal meeting time. Similarities between all three sections were that they used the same textbooks, assignments, tests, special projects, and grading scale. Every effort was made by the instructor to treat all students in all sections equally. The syllabi were identical with the exception that information regarding the use of technology was presented in the online sections. The assignment schedules for the face to face classes differed from the online sections only in the day of the week assignments or tests were due and the way that assignments and tests were administered (in person in face to face sections vs. online in online sections).

The survey data was collected through an online survey administered to students at the end of the Spring 2013 semester. Student responses were anonymous and could not be given without first completing a consent agreement. Students obtained credit by emailing the instructor a copy of the “Thank You for Participating” page of the online survey, which appeared after completing the survey. This page contained no identifying data on the survey answers that a particular student gave.

The survey questions analyzed in this paper utilized a five point Likert scale with one representing “Strongly Agree” and five representing “Strongly Disagree.” It included questions on student satisfaction with critical thinking skills, business law concepts learned in the course, and demographic characteristics. The survey was pilot tested using a group of students who were business law minors and who had taken the Legal Environment of Business course in a prior year; this resulted in minor wording changes to improve comprehension of the survey questions.

RESULTS

The data consisted of 64 completed surveys from students in the face to face course and 50 completed surveys in the online course. The respondent characteristics, summarized in Table 1, revealed several differences in the student populations of the two delivery methods. The face to face course had significantly more males than the online course. Almost 60% of the students in the face to face course were male, while 62% of students in the online course were female. Students attending the face to face course were significantly younger than students in the online course. Over 98% of the students in the face to face course were between the age of 18 and 34, while only 76% of the online class fell in this age range. The majority of students in the online course worked over twenty hours a week while the majority of students in the face to face course worked twenty hours or less. Notably, 30% of the online students were working greater than 40 hours per week, while only 7.8% of face to face students worked in excess of 40 hours per week. Fifty-six percent of the online students were enrolled in a full-time course load (greater than or equal to twelve credit hours), while 79.6% of face to face students were enrolled in a full time course load. The hours spent working on the course do not significantly differ between the two delivery methods with 87.5% of the face to face course and 88% of the online course reporting that they spent between either 0-9 or 10-19 hours weekly working on the course. Running a two way ANOVA on each of these characteristics and the course delivery method indicated no significant main effects or interactions on the participant’s course satisfaction. However, when we interpret credit hours based on our university’s definition of enrollment status (full time is greater than or equal to twelve credit hours), then as shown in Table 2 we do find significance. In our experiment, students with part time enrollment status are more likely to be satisfied with the course regardless of the delivery method.

The first research question investigated students’ perception of their learning. Specifically, it investigated their learning of business law concepts and critical thinking. The survey included six statements designed to capture their perception of their understanding of business law concepts. Table 3 summarizes these six statements and the responses to them. T-test analysis was conducted on each of the six statements’ means to determine if the online and face to face students felt

differently. For two of the six statements, students responded significantly differently depending on the course delivery they received.

Students participating in the face to face course agreed significantly more with the statement “Class discussion in this course positively impacted my ability to learn business law concepts in this course” ($t=-2.019$, $p=0.046$). Although discussion boards, chats, and instructor email messaging were used in the online course, it does seem reasonable that students in a face to face setting would feel that class discussions were more beneficial in their learning of business law concepts.

Conversely, students in the online course agreed significantly more with the statement “Interaction with my classmates during the semester positively impacted my ability to learn business laws concepts in this course” ($t=1.989$, $p=0.049$). The students in the online course potentially relied more on each other for feedback and discussion of classroom material, with the absence of an instructor being physically present at a regular meeting time. In the first statement, “class discussion” in a face to face setting could have been interpreted as discussion with the instructor, not with other students, while “interaction with my classmates” is more clearly regarding discussion and involvement with fellow students instead of with the instructor. The instructor noticed more material questions being directed toward her instead of toward other students in the face to face course format, whereas the instructor noticed that material questions were being directed toward fellow classmates in the online course format, as well as toward the instructor.

The research question also investigated students’ perception of their ability to think critically (RQ1b). The survey included six statements designed to capture student perception of critical thinking development. Table 4 summarizes the six statements and their responses. T-tests were conducted on each of the six statements’ means to determine if the online and face to face students felt differently. As was the case with their understanding of business law concepts, students responded significantly differently depending on the course delivery that they received on two of the six statements.

Students participating in the face to face course agreed significantly more with the statement “Class discussion in this course positively impacted my ability to learn critical thinking in this course” ($t=-2.429$, $p=0.017$). Although discussion boards, chats, and instructor email messaging were used in the online course, it does seem reasonable that students in a face to face setting would feel that class discussions were more beneficial in their development of critical thinking skills.

Similar to the findings regarding business law concepts, students in the online course agreed significantly more with the statement “Interaction with my classmates during the semester positively impacted my ability to learn critical thinking in this course” ($t=1.824$, $p=0.071$). Since online learning does not have the consistent physical presence of an instructor, students in an online course may be more inclined to interact with their classmates to discuss course material than to wait for an asynchronous reply from their instructor.

The second research question investigates student satisfaction with the course and the course instruction. The survey included two statements to measure satisfaction. Table 5 summarizes the results of these two statements. Despite the fact that several studies have found

online students to be less satisfied in their course and course instruction (Johnson et al., 2000; Shelly et al., 2008), this is not the result that we find. We do not find a significant difference in satisfaction with the course or course instruction between the online and face to face delivery methods. Over 98% of the students in the face to face course agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Overall, I am satisfied with this course.” One hundred percent of the students in the online course agreed or strongly agreed. Ninety-eight percent of the students in both the face to face and online courses agreed with the statement “Overall, I am satisfied with the instruction I’ve received in this course.” This supports the findings of prior research that specific efforts to align important course characteristics can eliminate differences in overall satisfaction between online and face to face courses.

LIMITATIONS

The students surveyed were taught by only one instructor during one semester at the same four year university. Therefore, it may be difficult to generalize results to all instructors at all institutions of higher education. Additionally, the number of students surveyed was small. A larger survey data group would show a better representation of all Legal Environment of Business students.

Students who work full time or live far from campus may not have the option to take face to face courses. Since these students cannot take classes face to face, they turn to a more flexible education option, and then choose whatever online format options are available in a given semester. Certainly, then, those students who need to take online classes may have a different perception of course satisfaction if they have never taken a face to face course, have not taken a face to face course in a period of time, or cannot take face to face courses due to time constraints. These students would only know education in an online format, and could only compare their own satisfaction of a course with other online courses, not face to face courses. (However, in analyzing the course rosters for our online students, 67.5% of those enrolled in our online courses were also enrolled in at least one face to face course during the same semester).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study contribute to the body of research comparing face to face and online sections of the same course. There has been little research done comparing gender, age, working hours, and student total enrollment hours characteristics with regard to student satisfaction of online versus face to face sections of the same course (Shelley et.al., 2008). The data in our study suggests that the majority of the students in the online course sections work full time. The students in the online course are also older. This supports the idea that online students tend to be older, part or full time workers, and returning to school after being in the working world for a period of time. Also shown in our data, these students often take fewer course hours, which is likely due to their lack of time. The students in our survey who took the face to face section of the course tended to be the more traditional college student: younger, often directly out of high school, working fewer hours outside of school, and taking more course hours. These students may have more opportunity to choose a face to face or online section of a course based on their own

preferences versus needing to take only online sections based on limited time availability as an employed full time student.

Despite the differences between the online and face to face course sections in gender, age, working hours, and course hours, we do not find that these characteristics have a significant impact on student satisfaction regardless of the course delivery method. However, students in the face to face course significantly agreed more than those online with the use of classroom discussion as a factor in helping them learn. On the other hand, online students significantly agreed more than face to face students that classmate interaction helped them to learn business law concepts.

While this data adds to and further confirms that there is no significant difference in student satisfaction of the same course in either online or face to face formats, future research in the comparison of online and face to face courses should focus on student perceptions of learning and how to synchronize the effectiveness of such perceptions in both course formats. Additionally, further clarification of the difference in “classroom discussion” and “classmate interaction” should be researched to determine whether clarification of these terms will change the significant difference in student learning perception.

Higher education will likely continue to offer more online courses to meet student demands, but additional research in the identified areas of significant difference, such as student learning perception, may help institutions discover the most effective and satisfactory methods of equating online and face to face instruction. Also, an important area of research should be to examine the reasons why students choose online courses over face to face courses. As the data in this study suggests, students choosing online courses tend to be older working students, and therefore, the decision to choose an online course may be driven by their time constraints versus personal preference. Additionally, future research that examines course delivery outcomes in specific disciplines will increase knowledge of discipline-specific factors that may impact student learning.

Table 1
Respondent Characteristics by Delivery Method

	Face to Face	Online
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	57.8%	38%
Female	42.2%	62%
<i>Age range</i>		
18-24	82.8%	58%
25-34	15.6%	18%
35-54	1.6%	18%
Over 54	0%	6%
<i>Weekly hours of employment</i>		
0-10	46.9%	18%
11-20	20.3%	20%
21-40	25%	32%
41-60	7.8%	28%
Over 60	0%	2%
<i>Number of courses this semester</i>		
1 or 2	4.7%	24%
3	15.6%	20%
4	42.2%	30%
5	34.3%	22%
Over 5	3.1%	4%
<i>Self reported GPAs</i>		
0-1.9	1.6%	4%
2.0-2.4	12.5%	12%
2.5-2.9	31.3%	18%
3.0-3.4	14.1%	34%
3.5-4.0	40.6%	32%
<i>Weekly hours spent on the course</i>		
0-9	62.5%	52%
10-19	25%	36%
20-39	12.5%	8%
40-59	0%	2%
Over 60	0%	2%

Table 2
Source Table for 2 (Enrollment Classification) x 2 (Course Delivery) Completely Between Subjects ANOVA

Dependent Variable: Overall, I am satisfied with this course.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Power
Corrected Model	1.367 ^a	3	.456	1.627	.187	4.880	.417
Intercept	177.405	1	177.405	633.239	.000	633.239	1.000
Enrollment Classification	.891	1	.891	3.180	.077	3.180	.424
Course Delivery Method	.753	1	.753	2.688	.104	2.688	.369
Enrollment Classification*Course Delivery Method	.312	1	.312	1.115	.293	1.115	.182
Error	30.817	110	.280				
Total	271.000	114					
Corrected Total	32.184	113					

R Squared = .042 (Adjusted R Squared = .016)

Table 3
Statements of Business Law Concepts

	n	Mean
<i>Face to Face Course Delivery</i>		
I am satisfied with the amount of business law concepts I have learned in this course.	64	1.58 (0.612)
I believe the course format (online or face to face) positively impacted my ability to learn business law concepts.	64	1.59 (0.495)
The number of students in this section positively impacted my ability to learn business law concepts in this course.	64	2.22 (0.745)
The class meeting time positively impacted my ability to learn business law concepts in the course.	64	2.08 (0.803)
Class discussion in this course positively impacted my ability to learn business law concepts in this course.	64	1.67 (0.619)
Interaction with my classmates during the semester positively impacted my ability to learn business law concepts in this course.	64	2.45 (0.815)
<i>Online Course Delivery</i>		
I am satisfied with the amount of business law concepts I have learned in this course.	50	1.50 (0.647)
I believe the course format (online or face to face) positively impacted my ability to learn business law concepts.	50	1.50 (0.505)
The number of students in this section positively impacted my ability to learn business law concepts in this course.	50	2.30 (0.839)
The class meeting time positively impacted my ability to learn business law concepts in the course.	50	2.00 (0.881)
Class discussion in this course positively impacted my ability to learn business law concepts in this course.	50	1.96 (0.903)
Interaction with my classmates during the semester positively impacted my ability to learn business law concepts in this course.	50	2.14 (0.857)

The standard deviations are in parentheses below the means.

Table 4
Statements of Critical Thinking

	n	Mean
<i>Face to Face Course Delivery</i>		
I am satisfied with the amount of critical thinking skills I have learned in this course.	64	1.47 (0.503)
I believe the course format (online or face to face) positively impacted my ability to learn critical thinking skills.	64	1.39 (0.492)
The number of students in this section positively impacted my ability to learn critical thinking in this course.	64	2.23 (0.868)
The class meeting time positively impacted my ability to learn critical thinking in the course.	64	2.06 (0.852)
Class discussion in this course positively impacted my ability to learn critical thinking in this course.	64	1.72 (0.629)
Interaction with my classmates during the semester positively impacted my ability to learn critical thinking in this course.	64	2.52 (0.873)
<i>Online Course Delivery</i>		
I am satisfied with the amount of critical thinking skills I have learned in this course.	50	1.48 (0.580)
I believe the course format (online or face to face) positively impacted my ability to learn critical thinking skills.	50	1.54 (0.503)
The number of students in this section positively impacted my ability to learn critical thinking in this course.	50	2.26 (0.876)
The class meeting time positively impacted my ability to learn critical thinking in the course.	50	1.98 (0.869)
Class discussion in this course positively impacted my ability to learn critical thinking in this course.	50	2.10 (1.035)
Interaction with my classmates during the semester positively impacted my ability to learn critical thinking in this course.	50	2.22 (0.840)

The standard deviations are in parentheses below the means.

Table 5
Student Satisfaction Statements

<i>Face to Face Course Delivery</i>	n	Mean	Percent Strongly Agree	Percent Agree	Percent Neutral	Percent Disagree	Percent Strongly Disagree
Overall, I am satisfied with this course.	64	1.41 (0.526)	60.9	37.5	1.6	0.0	0.0
Overall, I am satisfied with the instruction I've received in this course	50	1.50 (0.544)	52.0	46.0	2.0	0.0	0.0
<i>Online Course Delivery</i>	n	Mean	Percent Strongly Agree	Percent Agree	Percent Neutral	Percent Disagree	Percent Strongly Disagree
Overall, I am satisfied with this course.	64	1.31 (0.467)	68.8	31.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
Overall, I am satisfied with the instruction I've received in this course	50	1.34 (0.593)	70.0	28.0	2.0	0.0	0.0

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